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s Aviation Fulfilling Its Peacetime Role?

A radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System

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Is Aviation Fulfilling Its Peacetime Role?

Mr. McBurney: Is aviation fulfilling its peacetime role?

Our problem today is the proper development of aviation in America. Since this whole question is so closely related to the military services I should like to ask you what are the principal interests of military aviation in peacetime? How would you put that, General?

Major General Craigie: I think when you first consider the subject of the peacetime role of aviation you are apt to think just of the commercial aspects, but there is a very decided military implication in the peacetime role of aviation. I think I can describe it best in this way: the military services must rely on the aviation industry for the development during peacetime of the equipment which we are going to have to use in the event of another war. I don't think I can emphasize too strongly that that development has got to take place well ahead of the occurrence of the emergency. It actually takes five years to develop a modern military airplane. So, if that development, then, isn't under way five years before the emergency you are not going to have the equipment at the start of the war.

Reciprocal Relationship

Mr. McBurney: Is there a reciprocal relationship there, Borden? I am wondering about the reliance of commercial aviation on military aviation for development, equipment, personnel, and the like.

Mr. Borden: I would say there is no question about our reliance on the development of equipment. I can only say that the newest and latest of commercial planes, the Boeing Stratocruiser, is sort of a blood brother to the B-50 and a sort of a cousin to the old B-29.

General Craigie: As a matter of fact, the wings, the landing gear, the engines, the control surfaces don't care whether they are attached to a bomber or a transport. And so you will see many other examples in addition to the Stratocruiser of transport airplanes that are the direct outgrowth of the development of a bombardment airplane project. Another good one is the Consolidated C-99 which is the transport version of the Consolidated B-36. To go back a little in history, the original Boeing Clipper ships which pioneered a lot of our trans-ocean travel were the original B-15 airplane with a flying boat hull replacing the bomber fuselage.

Mr. Borden: And they only made one experimental B-15, didn't they? And out of that came all of the development.

General Craigie: They made just one experimental B-15 and followed it up with several Clipper ships.

High-Speed Development

Mr. Voelter: General, wouldn't you be inclined to say that the development of the civil aircraft we are using today is more in the high-speed range as applied to the development and experimentation by the Army—although I am sure that the military services have used a lot of the light aircraft in combat, as a matter of fact, and very successfully, yet they are still remaining more in the high-speed class and right now in the jet category.

General Craigie: Right now we are putting a great deal of emphasis on higher speeds which are possible because of jet propulsion. We are putting emphasis on higher altitude operation. Both of those factors were applied initially to the smaller, fighter airplanes. Then they became applicable to the bigger bombardment airplanes.

Mr. McBurney: You can use jet propulsion on a large plane?

GENERAL CRAIGIE: We have several bombardment airplanes flying today powered solely by jet propulsion.

MR. BORDEN: What was that Boeing that came from Seattle to Washington last year?

GENERAL CRAIGIE: The B-37 from Moses Lake, Washington, just east of Seattle into Washington D. C. at an average speed of over 600 miles an hour.

MR. MCBURNEY: What are the implications of this jet development for commercial planes? Are you going to be able to use those, Borden?

MR. BORDEN: Of course, you know that both the British and the Canadians have developed pure jet transport aircraft, and all of us are watching that development with the greatest of interest. We have none at present—no American airline has, but we expect that one of these days we will have the jet plane on our doorstep.

Use of Airports

MR. MCBURNEY: Now these recent air accidents have raised a question here, whether it is wise, Voelter, for military and commercial planes to use the same airports. Do you think that can be done?

MR. VOELTER: There is a lot of controversy on that, Doctor, and I guess that controversy will go on and on and on. However, in my own opinion, there are many airports throughout the United States where military and commercial aircraft have operated without the slightest conflict—at least so far as we know—and at those points where congestion is not great, and where there are other advantageous points in the combined use of the airport by both classes, there seems to be little reason for making it mandatory for the commercial and military aircraft to be segregated.

MR. MCBURNEY: What is going to happen when you have these jet aircraft going in and out of these civilian airports at speeds of the sort the General was talking about—600 or 700 miles an hour?

GENERAL CRAIGIE: I think you are bringing up an important point there, Doctor. I think the difficulty comes from trying to have fast jet airplanes operating out of airports at the same time that you have a large volume of slower speed transport aircraft. If you can have airplanes of approximately the same speed operating out of an airport, it doesn't make any difference whether some are military, some commercial and some private or how they are mixed up. I think the Berlin airlift showed definitely that you can have a tremendous amount of traffic going continuously in and out of an airdrome if it all falls in approximately the same speed range.

MR. MCBURNEY: But you are not going to get that in the average airport, are you Voelter?

MR. VOELTER: Well, the relation of speed not only applies to handling them on the ground but it applies to handling them in the air. As a matter of fact, anyone can recognize that the vast space that we have to cover with aircraft, and the number of aircraft that are flying, both fast aircraft and slow aircraft, must have some segment of safety instilled in handling them in the air. That is one of the reasons why our survey—which is still going on—has resulted in what we call altitude separation in handling of various speed ranges in aircraft, getting them to their destination and getting them down on the ground. We are now able to do this very successfully with the use of the new electronic devices we have at our disposal.

Contribution of Military

MR. MCBURNEY: I gather from this discussion that we are primarily indebted to military aviation for development and research in this field. Is that a fair interpretation, Borden?

MR. BORDEN: I should think so.

GENERAL CRAIGIE: I think you might spend just a moment on this phase of the development. The high speed, high altitude aircraft that are being brought out today are tremendously expensive. In the old days—I am thinking now of 1935—it was possible to design and construct an experimental airplane . . . North American Aviation did it when they designed and built a trainer for us . . . for around $35,000. Now it costs from 15 to 25 million dollars to design and build one or two prototype airplanes for tests. So I think we have got to accept the fact that developments which cost that much must be sponsored and the major development cost borne by the government.

MR. MCBURNEY: And the commercial lines, I take it, profit from that research and that development?

MR. BORDEN: Yes. I would like to say, too, Doctor, that the commercial lines also do a great deal of developing themselves. I won't say it is by any means as great as that of the services—it couldn't be—it would be limited in cost. But they do make their own contributions.

MR. MCBURNEY: I am preparing the way here for a discussion of what seems to me to be our most important question today: the role of commercial aviation in our transportation system.

I would like to begin with some talk about this factor of safety. We have mentioned it in relation to the use of military and commercial planes on the same landing strips. But how do you account for this flurry of recent accidents, Borden?

'Hazard of Motion'

MR. BORDEN: I would say that any accident is the result of what Captain Rickenbacker referred to as "the hazard of motion"; but I would like to add that during the year 1949—and these figures are up within a week—the domestic scheduled airlines flew 6,452,500,000 passenger miles with only 92 fatalities. That is about 1.4 deaths per hundred million passenger miles. This has been one of the best records in the air transportation business. You will find that insurance people tell you that it is 60 per cent more dangerous to drive your own personal car from Chicago to California than it is to take a scheduled airline.

GENERAL CRAIGIE: Airplane accidents also provide good publicity, good news value, so whenever there is an aircraft accident, it is featured in the papers all over the country. Naturally it is understandable you don't see publicity that brings out the figures that Gail Borden just mentioned of the millions of miles when no accident occurs.

MR. BORDEN: Billions!

MR. MCBURNEY: How do you account for this improved safety record, Voelter?

MR. VOELTER: We are inclined to account for it by the installation of the ILS which is the Instrument Landing System, the GCA and the various electronic facilities we have installed on airports and on the entire system of airways throughout the United States.

Airport Accidents

MR. MCBURNEY: That seems to be where we have had most of the accidents—around the airports. They used to bump into mountains and buildings, etc. That has been considerably reduced, hasn't it?

GENERAL CRAIGIE: Very definitely reduced.

MR. MCBURNEY: And your accidents now occur right around the airports. Is that right?

MR. VOELTER: No, I wouldn't say that. It just so happens that the last few accidents have occurred around airports.

MR. BORDEN: And two of those were for the same reason.

MR. VOELTER: That is right.

We are not satisfied, however, and indeed no one concerned with any form of transportation can ever efford to become complacent and relax his efforts to increase safety. Just as a continuing program of highway safety is necessary, so does CAA [Civil

Aeronautics Administration] keep working for greater aviation safety through the three E's—and let's not forget this: Engineering, Education, and Enforcement. Our goal is to have a better record than any other form of transportation in 1950.

Increase in Passengers

MR. MCBURNEY: What cut of the passenger field do you expect the air transportation to have? What are you aiming at?

MR. BORDEN: I can only say that we have in 1949 increased the penetration of the so-called first-class passenger market, that is to say Pullman, and I think our figures today show that all scheduled airlines have penetrated 43½ per cent of the first-class passenger market.

MR. MCBURNEY: In the future do you think it will go beyond that?

MR. BORDEN: There's no doubt about it.

MR. MCBURNEY: What do you think about this air coach field, the second-class passenger travel?

MR. BORDEN: As you all know that is a new field, and we are slowly getting into it. The United Airlines is not in the coach business, although some of our competitors are going into it.

MR. MCBURNEY: Is the airline very well adapted to short hauls, Borden?

MR. BORDEN: We feel that under 75 miles it is ridiculous to go into air transportation. Long-haul business is where we can give the safety, speed, and comfort and economy of travel.

MR. MCBURNEY: Is it fair to say, then, you are aiming primarily at the first-class passenger field in long hauls? That is the niche for the aircraft. Is that your conclusion?

MR. BORDEN: I would say that is what it has been. Of course this is a constantly changing business. We may have mass transportation tomorrow, but at present we have grown with the people who normally would take a Pullman if they were going on a long haul.

MR. MCBURNEY: Do you think the fact that your air schedules often break down—a man starts in the plane and winds up on a train . . . he never knows whether he is going to reach his destination . . . is going to be a factor in your development?

MR. BORDEN: It's a curious thing, but there has never been anyone apparently who has never had some trouble with the schedule, but I can tell you that the United Airlines finished 97.5 per cent of all its scheduled flights in 1949.

MR. MCBURNEY: Is that typical of the business generally, do you think?

Schedules

MR. BORDEN: I think it probably is. I can't speak for all of the lines on that, but I am sure that their utilization of planes and the regularities of their flights has increased enormously in the last year.

MR. VOELTER: Our feeling in that is that all airline users, and particularly businessmen, want reasonable assurance when they plan an air trip that they will be able to take off on time and land at their intended destination as scheduled. In the past weather has been an important obstacle, but we believe the landing aids in our program already are well on the way towards licking this aspect of the problem. The ILS, for instance—and once again I say ILS is the instrument landing system now installed at 96 major air terminals throughout the United States—has made this possible.

MR. BORDEN: Mr. Voelter, may I add to that by saying that thanks to the aids of the CAA and the intensive training that United has put in, we finished 73 per cent of our flights on time or within 15 minutes of scheduled time in the year 1949.

GENERAL CRAIGIE: I heard an interesting statement recently along this line, that for the month of September the airlines flew 99⅓ per cent of all their scheduled flights. Along the line that Mr. Voelter was discussing a moment ago—he spoke of the improved electronic aids that make it possible to complete more flights in safety and comfort—there's another factor which warrants a little bit of discussion: I mentioned earlier the military's interest in operating at higher altitudes. It seems to me the work that has been put into the development of pressurization of our military airplanes and is now being applied directly to the pressurization of commercial transport airplanes has made possible the operation of these airplanes at high altitudes so that they are going above the weather. It not only is increasing the comfort of the passengers . . .

Pressurized Aircraft

MR. BORDEN: General, that has been extremely important to us because for the first time since we got DC-6's, which are pressurized, we have been able to fly over the weather and also fly what we call pressure patterns. Thus, a trip may seem to be going all over the country, up and down, but will still arrive on time because the man does not have to buck unfavorable winds and weather.

MR. MCBURNEY: Do you men carry very much freight and express in your planes?

MR. BORDEN: Yes, it's growing all the time. And I do have a figure on that. In 1949, with December estimated, United has carried 60,407,766. That does not include the 19 million plus pounds of air express. I am separating the two.

MR. MCBURNEY: Do you think the time will ever come when the movement of express and freight will exceed passenger service volume in this air business?

MR. VOELTER: I don't know. I am inclined to believe we can think in those terms. As a matter of fact only within the last few days the president of one of the large major airlines has stated that he believes that within the next ten years the freight business may exceed the passenger business.

MR. BORDEN: That may be, but we don't believe that the airlines are going to put the railroads out of business in the freight field. After all you can just figure on the weight lifting: we can't carry I-beams and coal unless somebody wants to pay handsomely for the privilege.

GENERAL CRAIGIE: It seems to me the air freight is particularly applicable to the hauling of cargo which has a very high value per pound, or very high value per cubic foot.

MR. BORDEN: Many manufacturers of women's fashions want those fashions to get to some distributing point in a hurry. They will pay and use a great deal of air freight.

MR. VOELTER: In the over-all the net of it is that it is cheaper to carry them by air than it is by surface.

GENERAL CRAIGIE: We might keep this thought in mind, too: there hasn't yet been an aircraft designed specifically for commercial air freight. We have brought out one or two that have been designed for cargo hauling, but of necessity we have to put a number of features into our aircraft that permit us to drop equipment from the air by parachute, etc. This adds weight to the airplane, so that the airplane is not directly applicable to freight hauling. I think when someone brings out an airplane that is designed specifically for hauling express and freight that it can be done more economically.

MR. BORDEN: That is certainly on the books, but, as you probably know, the first air freight tariffs were only filed in 1946. I know the freight plane is coming one of these days.

Military Transports?

MR. MCBURNEY: I am interested in some of the competitive forces at work in the transportation business.

GENERAL CRAIGIE: May I say one more word about air freight before we leave that? The military is extremely interested in the development of a healthy air-freight industry airplane operation in this country. In time of an emergency such an operation would be of tremendous value to the military. Until this last war the military did not consider the transport as a military airplane, but we found out during the war that it was just as much a military airplane as was a fighter or a bomber. So when another emergency comes along and we have a healthy freight airline industry in this country it will be possible to convert a large part of that to military use. It will be of tremendous value to us. Of course we used the airlines very greatly during the last war even though they were not too large at the beginning of the war.

MR. VOELTER: As a matter of fact you have now developed a special cargo plane in the Packet job.

GENERAL CRAIGIE: That's the C-82. That was the plane I had in mind when I said we have to build certain penalties into a military cargo airplane that don't make it 100 per cent satisfactory for commercial use. We have to build into the C-82, for example, all of the equipment that is necessary for dropping cargo by parachute from the air, and for carrying airborne troops. We have to have special floors put in there to handle these very concentrated loads of aircraft engines and that sort of thing, which I don't believe you would have in a commercial airplane. If the C-82, this Fairchild Packet, had been designed for commercial cargo use it would probably have a couple of thousand pounds less metal in it. The carrying capacity that is now being used to carry these military features could be devoted to carrying pay load.

'Competitive Forces'

MR. MCBURNEY: Let's get back to the question I raised a minute or two ago, about the competitive forces at work in this business. I gather from what you have said that you are making substantial inroads on the passenger field. The railroads and busses would be your principal competitors. You are making substantial inroads on the freight business and hope to make more. How do you account for that? Is there an inherent advantage in air transportation, or is it the fact that the military has developed these planes, that the government is paying essentially for development in research and that you fellows have a pretty important subsidy which gives you an advantage over the railroads?

GENERAL CRAIGIE: I would like to take exception to the word, "subsidy," Doctor McBurney. I don't believe that the commercial transport industry is being subsidized because of the fact that the military pays for a lot of the development which goes into those transport airplanes. We have to have the new bombers: We have to design the complete bomber including the wings, the landing gear, the engine installation and all. The mere fact that those features are applicable to a transport version is just a by-product of this process of developing bombers that we have to carry through.

MR. BORDEN: I think if you are talking in that line of subsidy you have to remember that you have an industry which has to be kept up and which commercial aviation alone could never keep up. If we didn't have the great aviation and engine factories throughout the country, when the emergency came we would have those men making bicycles somewhere instead of airplanes.

Nonscheduled Flights

MR. MCBURNEY: How about these nonscheduled operators, nonscheduled flights which appeared on the scene after the war? Often they are given credit for forcing rates down, for forcing this coach issue? Are they a competing factor of any important volume?

MR. VOELTER: I will probably draw some fire from Borden on this, but I do think the "nonscheds," as we call them, are probably responsible to a considerable degree for the instigation of these so-called air coach rates that we have now, and that the scheduled airlines have followed up on. Of course that was the outgrowth of the war again. There were available certain types of transport planes that were adaptable, and there were available many military pilots who had to put their education in aviation to work somehow, and they got busy and they started these nonscheds and began hauling passengers.

MR. MCBURNEY: What were they essentially—shoestring operators now going out of business?

MR. VOELTER: I wouldn't say. I wouldn't put them in that category at all. Some of them were shoestring operators and went out of business pretty fast and others got pretty big.

MR. MCBURNEY: But apparently they did put some heat on the commercial lines?

Influence on Rates

MR. BORDEN: Talking about putting heat on the commercial lines, after all, as Mr. Voelter knows, prices in air transportation have decreased considerably from the days when you used to sit in a 40-B-4 with the pilot outside and fly across the country, and that rate decrease is going along. I don't think you can say the nonscheds forced us to lower our rates. We have to go to the Civil Aeronautics Board to get them reduced anyway.

GENERAL CRAIGIE: I do think it is important to keep in mind that this nonscheduled operation was made possible, as Mr. Voelter brought out, because of the fact that there were a large number of surplus transports available after the war, and they were bought by these operators at a very small fraction of what a new transport airplane costs.

MR. BORDEN: Wait until they start buying Boeing Stratocruisers at approximately $1,700,000 each, and nature will take care of them.

MR. MCBURNEY: There is one whole area of this aviation picture we haven't even touched on, Voelter, and that is private aviation. What are your recommendations for developing and handling personal and business planes?

Private Aircraft

MR. VOELTER: In the first place, a lot of us are inclined to overlook the fact that the so-called private aircraft, the business-type aircraft and the aircraft used by farmers and just private operators account for better than 90 per cent of the civil aircraft registered in the United States. There has been a little drop in their usage during the past year, but yet we find that the increase is very material now.

MR. MCBURNEY: Do you expect that increase to continue?

MR. VOELTER: We certainly do.

MR. BORDEN: The farmers certainly are using them.

MR. VOELTER: The farmers certainly have brought it out.

GENERAL CRAIGIE: We of the military have a keen interest in the personal flyers and the business flyers, too. The more flying that is done in this country, the more air-minded our country is going to be, which is going to make our job easier. And the next point is that if your aircraft industry has to rely almost completely on military business and commercial airlines transports, it is a feast and famine industry. If this personal flying industry can be built up, then our industry will have a continuing backlog of private business in addition to our military and commercial traffic.

MR. MCBURNEY: In conclusion, gentlemen, may I say that there is apparently every indication that aviation promises to play a larger role in our transportation system and in future military operations. We have tried to assess our gains in aviation and suggest directions for development.

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Correction: Vol. 13, No. 22, "That Man John L. Lewis," p. 7, col. 1, l. 8, "Nazism" should read "nationalism."

Suggested Readings

Compiled by Barbara Wynn, Assistant,
Reference Department, Deering
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DEARING, CHARLES LEE, and OWEN, WILFRED. *National Transportation Policy.* Washington, D. C., Brookings Institute, 1949.

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Statement of General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, Chief of Staff, U.S. Air Force, as to the importance of air power in national defense.

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